Whither the Eskimo? A Penetrating New Series

By FARLEY MOWAT

INUK: MAN or MYTH

Only a few months out of the army in 1947, Farley Mowat got a summer job in the Arctic counting caribou. The census was ordered by the government to determine whether sufficient food and skins were available to the Eskimo.

Mowat became more interested in the Eskimos themselves than in the caribou-counting. The next year he went back to the Barrens in the region west of Hudson Bay. As a result of 14 months spent in the north, he wrote "The People of the Deer"—the Ihalmiut.

"I became so angry about the awful conditions under which they were forced to exist as a result of neglect by their fellow-Canadians, that I wasn't too careful about documenting my findings. Because I was vulnerable on certain points, a concerted effort was made to discredit the whole story," he says.

To his anger was added calm determination and over the next few years he kept in touch with the situation among the Eskimos by reading every report and pestering officials of the Northern Affairs Department in Ottawa.

In the summer of 1958, he flew 4,000 miles in the Actric regions, most of it in the Keewatin District of Northwest Territory. He went especially to visit the Ihalmiut and discovered that during the 10 years the band—which never numbered more than a few over 50—had lost 26 men, women and children from starvation or disease resulting from starvation.

This time he determined to check and re-check his facts. He spent months in Ottawa exploring the records and discussing his findings with Northern Affairs officials.

Now he is engaged in writing another book. Meantime, however, he has written for THE ISLANDER a series of six articles reporting his general conclusions and suggestions.

"This time," he says, "I have reported only what I can support by abundant evidence. And the situation among the Eskimos is still a disgrace to Canada."

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THE ESKIMO IS TWO MEN—one real, the other an illusion.

The illusion is the Eskimo we know best for the illusion has been carefully fostered over the generations. The missionary, the trader, the explorer and the writer have all contributed to the creation of this mythical little fellow; a stone-age anachronism clad in skins who lives in an igloo and who is always smiling and happy.

According to the myth Inuk is rather like a retarded child, full of good humor but quite incapable of looking after his own interests in the modern world. If we examine the myth closely we see that it is not quite as human as we are, and certainly not as smart.

In our scheme of things this version of Inuk fills a similar role to the one we ascribe to the panda in the animal kingdom.

Presumably this mythical Inuk will always require the paternal hand of missionaries, government agents and others who have vested interests in the Arctic, if he is to survive at all—and presumably this is why the myth has been so assiduously nurtured.

But, of course, this Eskimo does not, and never has existed.

The real Inuk is a man who, like the rest of us, is an immigrant to this continent. He is not so recent an immigrant as most of the rest of us for his ancestors probably crossed Bering Strait from Asia several thousands of years ago.

In their heyday the Innuit may have numbered 30 to 40,000 people, and they certainly dominated the top of the continent and were in control of

"DISGRACE TO CANADA"

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the eastern seaboard south of Newfoundland, as well as the north coast of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Inuk may have penetrated south in the middle of the continent as far as central Saskatchewan. He sent his exploring parties east to colonize Greenland and north to the Arctic islands. He built a continuous cultural complex, with a common language, from Bering Strait to Greenland's eastern shores.

In doing all this he displayed characteristics which set him apart from, and in certain respects above, the rest of humanity for, of all the branches of the human race, Inuk proved himself the most adaptable and the most enduring in the face of sheer physical adversity.

EQUIPPED WITH NOTHING much except his brains and hands he was able to make terms with the harshest and most brutal environment on this planet—and to prosper.

He paid a price for this success. The land which was his was so demanding that he had neither time nor opportunity to develop the material cultures in which the west was specialized. As far as technological development is concerned, he stayed where he was while the western man scampered into the era of the fish-finned automobiles and the hydrogen bomb.

Inuk's land dominated him, leaving scant time for creative endeavor or for leisurely excursions into the abstract realms of human thought. All the same, he had the capacity for art and thought; a capacity that has recently come to a great flowering in Greenland and which may even yet come to flowering in Canada.

But the Canadian Eskimo of today is unique in another way, for he is truly a man without a country.

Not one of the 11,500 Canadian Eskimos owns or has any rights to, a single acre of the Arctic wilderness which was undisputedly his for several thouand years.

We own the land and the minerals under it. We also own the animals, the walrus, seal and caribou, and even the fish, from which the Eskimo has always taken his major sustenance.

There are no reservations set aside for Inuk (which is probably a good thing) but on the other hand there are no laws which say that he should have a portion of the riches which we are beginning to find in his country.

Not only is he landless but he is very nearly stateless, too. He has never been a ward of the government nor of anyone else, in law, at least—though in effect he has long been a ward (or serf, if you prefer) to the traders, the missions, and the RCMP.

Today no authority in Ottawa can state with assurance exactly what Inuk's legal status is. But, since he is nothing else, it is assumed by Ottawa at long last that he is probably a Canadian citizen with equal rights and obligations with the rest of us.

This has been recognized in the fact that the Eskimo is required to pay income taxes. He may also vote in federal and local elections, if there is a candidate, which there seldom is in his homeland. He is theoretically entitled to the same educational, legal, health and economic safeguards as the rest of us, but he has never had these things, and may never get them.

AT THE SAME TIME that he pays taxes, he is subject to arbitrary invasion of his rights by the police and other organizations, and is required to give the police a degree of unquestioning obedience which would make us mutiny on the spot. The police, and even the missions, can pick him up and shunt him about like a prize cow from one pasture to another and, though this is illegal in law, Inuk has no lawyers.

Landless he certainly is—a squatter in his own country; and stateless he appears to be as well.

He is also voiceless. He has no representation on any council or elected body anywhere—with the exception of one or two local Eskimo councils recently organized in some Eskimo communities by the Department of Northern Affairs.

In all cases we speak for Inuk—and "we" means the missionaries, traders, police and any other would-be expert who may have an axe to grind, or who, in his wisdom, may actually believe that Inuk is not a man at all but only the myth we have created in his image.

In the next few articles I intend to do what I can to dispell the myth and introduce the man:

a man I've met and lived with, and whom I am very proud to call a friend;
a man we have done our best to eliminate but who has so far managed to survive our efforts;
a man of merit—and a man of worth;
Inuk—the man we do not know.

(To Be Continued)

This is a little Eskimo to whom civilization brought tuberculosis—and a fine hospital.